

The Romantic Idea of a University

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By the mid-eighteenth century, universities in both England and Germany were clearly in a state of decline. Enrollments were dropping and complaints about the quality of the curriculum and of instruction were rampant. Within a century, however, the situation had changed radically. Not only were the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge undergoing a revival in England, but new ones were being established as well. Germany, meanwhile, had seen the rise of an entirely new vision of the university with the foundation of the University of Berlin and the adoption of this model throughout the country. There were many reasons for this remarkable turnabout, but one which cannot be ignored was the rise of a new Idea of a university inspired by the romantic movement.

What, then, is meant by the term “Idea”? This term is ultimately rooted in Platonism, but is chiefly associated with the idealist philosophy of the nineteenth century. In one of his last works, Immanuel Kant stated that

An Idea is nothing other than a concept of perfection which is not yet found in experience.¹

An Idea is the conception of how something (a state, a society, or, in this case, a university) should be. It thus defines why something exists, and provides its *raison d’etre*.

Prior to the eighteenth century, the Idea of a university in Europe was confessional in nature. Universities were primarily there to promote a particular religion. Since Western Europe had but one recognized church in the Middle Ages, universities ultimately were supposed to promote the beliefs of that church. There were, of course, disputes over jurisdiction, over the roles of monastic and mendicant orders in the university structure, and over how much freedom theologians would be granted by university authorities. Ultimately, however, the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, and their counterparts in other lands served Catholicism.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Werke*, vol. 12, *Über Pädagogik* (Frankfort: Insel Verlag, 1964), 700.

The Reformation of course brought an end to this religious unity; however, it did not bring an end to the confessional Idea of a university, it merely redefined it. Europe was rent asunder, and the various confessions (Lutheran, Catholic, Calvinist, Anglican) struggled for survival and dominance. Universities became intellectual centers for this struggle. Their reason for existence was no longer to transmit a single Roman faith, but to propagate the state religion of a particular region. Universities from 1550 until the eighteenth century were supposed to train clerics, combat the heresies of the other confessions, and preserve the doctrines of whatever sect they served.²

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, new university foundations stopped in Germany and enrollments fell there and in England. Anecdotal evidence also points to a decline in student discipline in both countries. German universities were dominated by dueling fraternities and sometimes faced riots over the price of beer. Oxford and Cambridge for their part had many students who did little work and caused trouble in town. Many who went through Oxbridge during this period, including Jeremy Betham, Edward Gibbon, and Adam Smith, had little good to say about their Alma Maters once they became famous.³ Their complaints were all similar: Oxbridge students, tutors, and professors were lazy; the curriculum was outmoded; and a university degree was not needed for success.

An underlying problem was the decline of the confessional Idea of a university. With the end of the era of religious violence, the sectarianism that had shaped university life in the preceding two centuries had receded. As a consequence, the old, confessional Idea of a university was no longer functional. The Enlightenment, though it had some influence in Scottish universities (especially at Edinburgh) by and large passed by universities in England and Germany. Many saw universities as backwards and antiquated. One Berlin salon seriously discussed closing them altogether, while in Britain, the *Edinburgh Review*, a famed Whig journal, repeatedly attacked Oxford for its alleged lack of usefulness. Adam Smith himself advocated abolishing all endowments and forcing professors to live solely on direct payments from students. Those professors who taught useful things in an effective manner would survive; the rest should

² Friedrich Paulsen, *Die Deutschen Universitäten und das Universität Studium* (Berlin, 1902; reprint Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 40-52.

³ See Jeremy Betham, *Works of Bentham*, ed. By John Bowring, vol. 10; Edward Gibbon, *Autobiographies*; and Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937).

be allowed to fail in a competitive academic marketplace.⁴ Given the decline of the confessional Idea of a university, would this be the new Idea - serving the utilitarian needs of the new world of the industrial marketplace? Or would there be an alternative to this?

It is my contention that in both England and Germany such an alternative vision did arise from the Romantic movement. In Germany, this vision saw its genesis at the University of Jena in the 1790's. This volatile time in Europe saw Jena, hitherto just another small provincial Germany university, become a major center of learning under the guidance of Goethe. Schiller, Novalis, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the Schlegel brothers all came to Jena during this period, but the dominant personality was Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Fichte called for the creation of a new class of learned people to revitalize all of society. He also stood for the independence (and even dominance) of the Arts faculty vis a vis the "upper" faculties of law, theology, and medicine, hoping to create a new environment which would integrate the goals of idealist philosophy with the concept of *Bildung* as best exemplified by Goethe. In a well-known incident, Fichte was accused of atheism by the theological faculty at Jena, and, after challenging the authority of Carl August of Weimar, was dismissed from the university in 1799.

Fichte had nonetheless made a powerful impression as a teacher. He constantly exhorted his students to think for themselves and argued that as scholars they could boast:

...my existence has no limit. I am eternal....I lift my head boldly to the threatening stony heights, to the roaring cataracts, and to the crashing clouds in their fire-red sea. "I am eternal" I shout to them. "I defy your power....for I have found my vocation, and it is more permanent than you. It is eternal, and so am I."⁵

His view of the scholar was grandiose and bordered on the messianic, for he saw the freely practicing scholar one who built up the whole of society by developing his own talents to the fullest. Some came to Jena just to study with him and to be inspired by his brilliance and intense (and egoistic) personality. And while he certainly encouraged his students to pursue their

⁴ Smith, 733.

⁵ J. G. Fichte, *Early Philosophical Writings*, Trans. By Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 169.

Wissenschaften with fervor, he himself was always primarily a teacher; indeed, his greatest publications, including his *Wissenschaftslehre*, grew out of his teaching work.⁶

Above all, he took the concept of *Bildung* promoted by Goethe and tied it to the idealist philosophy of Kant. He offered an answer to the basic question of why one studies at a university: to develop one's own mind, and to thereby improve society at large. To make this possible, he sought to revolutionize the way Germany universities were run, bringing the heretofore "lower" faculty of the arts into a position of dominance at the expense of the pre-professional "upper" faculties of law, theology, and medicine. It was an Idea of a university which would change German universities forever as it was later reformulated with the founding of the University of Berlin.

What impact would this new Idea of a university have on English shores? Here, the key is realizing that some of the main conduits for the introduction of German thought into English life were the Lake District poets. Both William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge admired some aspects of German idealist thought and studied it. What they found distasteful about it, however, was its secularized view of the world. Coleridge complained that Fichte's theory of the self

Degenerated into a crude *egoismus*, a boastful and hyperbolic hostility to nature...lifeless, godless, and altogether unholy.⁷

Here lay the crux of the distinction between English and German thinking on this subject. While the romantic Idea of a university was secular in its outlook in Germany, in England, it was more explicitly Christian in articulation. As a result, the English romantics were quite satisfied with the role that Oxford and Cambridge played as seminaries of the Anglican church; if anything, they sought to expand it. Coleridge, in his later writings, envisioned a "clerisy" which, informed by both philosophy and the Bible, would serve as the moral rudder for the nation.⁸ His vision, along with that of Wordsworth, became quite influential at both Oxford and Cambridge by the

⁶ _____, *The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, Trans. By Peter Heath and John Lacks (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), 3.

⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., n.d.), 78.

⁸ _____, *On the Constitution of Church and State* (London: J.D. Dent & Sons, 1972), *passim*.

1830's. As pressure from the outside to change these ancient universities mounted, some within them used the thoughts of these poets as rallying points to defend traditional Oxbridge institutions. Outsiders, for example, influenced by utilitarianism, sought to lessen the influence of the colleges and make the universities more efficient by replacing tutors with lecturing professors and by forcing them to offer more useful, pre-professional courses of study. But groups such as the Cambridge Apostles and the Tractarians at Oxford strongly resisted this trend, citing the principles of the moral development of individuals and of the nation as enunciated by the Lake District poets.

What impact in the long run did the romantic Idea of a university have in Germany and England? It has long been recognized that Fichte, along with Wilhelm von Humboldt, was a key figure in the great change in German academic life which took place in the nineteenth century. One might argue, however, that as the nineteenth century wore on, Fichte's emphasis on teaching, on *Bildung*, was ultimately sacrificed to the growing emphasis on *Wissenschaft* and to the growing social prestige of the professor.⁹ But clearly the romantic Idea of a university in Germany was dynamic and a promoter of change. In England, however, it played a far more conserving role, and is one of the reasons that Oxford and Cambridge retain the decentralized, tutorial system which to this day sets them apart from most other European universities.

⁹ See esp. Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969).